

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 SINGAPORE 1331

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, PINS, SHUM, SOPN, SN

SUBJECT: IMPACT OF GOS ANTI-SUBVERSIVE CAMPAIGN ON DOMESTIC AND
FOREIGN OPINION

REF: (A) SINGAPORE 1078, (B) SINGAPORE 1280, (C) SINGAPORE 1287

1. INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY. AFTER A HIATUS OF SOME TWO WEEKS, GOS ON MARCH 26 RESUMED THE RELEASE OF WRITTEN CONFESSIONS BY TWO DETAINEES, SUPPLEMENTED A DAY LATER BY THE NOW TRADITIONAL TELEVISED INTERVIEW. NOTABLE ABOUT THESE MOST RECENT DISCLOSURES IS THEIR NATURE AND TIMING. THE TWO DETAINEES, MICHAEL FERNANDEZ AND ONG BOCK CHUAN -- JAILED IN FEBRUARY WITH G. RAMAN -- REVEALED AN ABORTED PLAN TO SET UP A HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE IN SINGAPORE IN 1976 DESIGNED TO INDUCE THE PAP REGIME TO RELEASE POLITICAL DETAINEES. ALTHOUGH THE CONFESSIONS HAD APPARENTLY BEEN AVAILABLE FOR SOME TIME, THEIR RELEASE IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE LOCAL PRESS HAD PRINTED EXTENSIVE EXCERPTS FROM THE USG REPORT ON
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THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN SINGAPORE (REFS B & C)
APPARENTLY WAS A COINCIDENCE.

2. IN THE MEANTIME, THE FAR EASTER ECONOMIC REVIEW (FEER) IN ITS MARCH 25 ISSUE SMOTHERED THE ARUN SENKUTTUVAN-G. RAMAN CONFESSIONS OF EARLY MARCH (REF A) WITH DETAILED REBUTTALS AND MOREOVER, THREATENED PUBLICATION OF THE

CONTENTS OF THE NOW FAMOUS TAPE ON WHICH FEER EDITOR DEREK DAVIES RECORDED HIS RECOLLECTIONS OF A MARCH 1976 CONVERSATION WITH LEE KUAN YEW. THERE HAS AS YET BEEN NO OFFICIAL GOS REACTION TO THE FEER PRESENTATION OF ITS SIDE OF THE STORY. IN ADDITION, THE FOREIGN PRESS WAS CHASTISED BY FOREIGN MINISTER RAJARATNAM IN PARLIAMENT ON MARCH 23 FOR NOT PARTICIPATING ACTIVELY IN PREVIOUSLY TELEVISED PRESS CONFERENCE CONFSSIONALS. RAJA ALSO ASSERTED, IN RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS, THAT RECENT DETENTIONS AND CONFESSIONS HAVE NOT TARNISHED SINGAPORE'S INTERNATIONAL REPUTATION. RAJA'S CONCLUSION IS DEBATABLE. MOREOVER, WHILE THE GOS IS PERHAPS SUCCEEDING IN WARNING THE MORE CRITICAL ELEMENTS AMONG THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING MIDDLE CLASS AGAINST LENDING THEMSELVES TO COMMUNIST CAUSES, THE CULPABILITY FOR SERIOUS WRONGDOING OF SEVERAL RECENT DETAINEES HAS NOT BEEN PERSUASIVELY PRESENTED BY THE TELEVISED CONFESSIONS WHICH HAVE MET WITH GENERAL SKEPTICISM. END INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY.

3. THE GOS ANTI-SUBVERSION CAMPAIGN TOOK YET ANOTHER TWIST ON MARCH 26 WITH THE CONFESSIONS OF DETAINED LAWYER MICHAEL FERNANDEZ AND HOTEL EXECUTIVE ONG BOCK CHUAN THAT THEY HAD SOUGHT TO HELP SET UP A HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE IN SINGAPORE IN 1976. FERNANDEZ AND ONG ATTEMPTED TO ENLIST WELL-KNOWN ANTI-COMMUNIST PERSONALITIES TO JOIN THE COMMITTEE TO LEND IT RESPECTABILITY. IN FACT, THEY SUCCEEDED WITH PEOPLE LIKE GWEE AH LENG, A DOCTOR; J.B. JEYARETNAM, A LAWYER AND WORKERS PARTY LEADER; AND PATRICK GOH, A CATHOLIC PRIEST. ACCORDING TO RAMAN -- WHO OBLIGED THE SINGAPORE AUTHORITIES WITH A STATEMENT

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TO SUPPLEMENT FERNANDEZ' AND ONG'S REVELATIONS -- THIS COMMITTEE WAS INTENDED TO DISCREDIT THE PAP GOVERNMENT BY PUBLICIZING THE ALLEGED HUMAN RIGHTS INFRACTIONS OF THE GOS AND BRING PRESSURE TO BEAR ON THE GOS BY SUPPLYING SUCH INFORMATION TO AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, THE U.N. COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE SOCIALIST INTERNATIONAL (SI). FERNANDEZ AND ONG DEPICTED THEMSELVES AS RELUCTANT, YET NOT UNWILLING, ACCOMPLICES OF RAMAN'S (A SELF-CONFESSED COMMUNIST DETAINEE) AND DR. POH SOO KAI'S (ACKNOWLEDGED TO BE A COMMUNIST PARTY OF MALAYA CADRE) IN THIS ENDEAVOR. IN HIS STATEMENT, RAMAN SAID THAT THE COMMITTEE PROJECT NEVER GOT OFF THE GROUND BECAUSE " THE GOVERNMENT HAD IN THE MEANTIME BROUGHT INTO THE OPEN THE SI ATTEMPT TO EXPEL THE PAP AND EXPOSED THE MOVE AS A COMMUNIST MOVE TO FORCE THE GOVERNMENT TO RELEASE HARD-CORE COMMUNISTS".

4. THESE NEWEST REVELATIONS WERE PRECEDED BY THE FEER'S REACTION TO THE EARLIER CONFESSIONS OF ARUN SENKUTTUVAN AND G. RAMAN. IN ITS MARCH 25 ISSUE

(WITHHELD FROM NEWSTAND SALE BY ITS DISTRIBUTOR FOR A FEW DAYS FOR FEAR OF LIBEL, EVEN THOUGH THE MINISTRY OF CULTURE WHICH CONTROLS THE IMPORT OF ALL PUBLICATIONS SAID IT HAD NO OBJECTION TO SALE), FEER DEVOTED ABOUT EIGHT PAGES TO REBUTTING ARUN'S ASSERTIONS. DAVIES' THREE PIECES ON THE SUBJECT WERE BUTTRESSED BY STATEMENTS OF OTHER JOURNALISTS IMPLICATED BY ARUN. WHILE FEER COVERAGE CONSTITUTES A VERBOSE BUT FAIRLY CREDIBLE EFFORT TO REBUT ARUN'S CONFESSIONS AND CASTS ADDITIONAL DOUBT ON HIS CREDIBILITY, IT ALSO REPRESENTS AN UNMISTAKABLE WARNING TO LEE KUAN YEW AND THE GOS THAT IT REFUSES TO BE INTIMIDATED BY GOS ACTIONS. INDEED, IN A THINLY VEILED THREAT, FEER NOTES THAT ANY FURTHER REVELATIONS AGAINST FEER AND DAVIES OR INAPPROPRIATE TREATMENT OF DETAINED FORMER FEER CORRESPONDENT HO KWON PING WILL DRAW ADDITIONAL REACTION, INCLUDING PUBLICATION OF FULL CONTENTS OF NOW FAMOUS DAVIES TAPE. (COMMENT. FOREIGN MINISTER
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RAJARATNAM RECENTLY TOLD AMBASSADOR THAT GOS WOULD NOT RESPOND TO DAVIES' TELEGRAPHIC REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO PUBLISH TRANSCRIPT OF TAPE SINCE TO DO SO WOULD CONTRADICT GOS VIEW REGARDING CONFIDENTIALITY OF CONVERSATION. END COMMENT.)
IF ONE IS TO BELIEVE DAVIES, PUBLICATION WOULD BE PERSONALLY EMBARRASSING TO LEE (BECAUSE OF DISPARAGING RACIAL COMMENTS ALLEGEDLY MADE AGAINST ARUN) AND BECAUSE IT WOULD REVEAL EMPTINESS OF ALLEGATIONS THAT TAPE COULD HAVE SOURED GOS/GOM BILATERAL RELATIONS.

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 2 OF 2 SINGAPORE 1331

5. AT ABOUT THE SAME TIME AS THE FEER APPEARED, FOREIGN MINISTER RAJARATNAM, REPLYING TO QUESTIONS IN PARLIAMENT ON MARCH 23, RESPONDED TO CRITICISMS OF SINGAPORE IN BRITISH PRESS BY ASSERTING THAT "SINGAPORE'S REPUTATION WITH SOME 150 NATIONS IS AS SOUND AS IT WAS BEFORE". NOTING THE CRITICISM IN VARIOUS BRITISH PUBLICATIONS, RAJA OBSERVED THAT THEY DID NOT REPRESENT WORLD OPINION AND THAT THE RECENT ARRESTS IN SINGAPORE HAD GONE UNMENTIONED BY FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS. RAJA RESERVED HIS SHARPEST COMMENTS FOR WILLIAM SHAWCROSS' SUNDAY TIMES ARTICLE (PUBLISHED IN FULL IN SINGAPORE'S ENGLISH LANGUAGE PRESS), STATING THAT SHAWCROSS WAS INDULGING IN "THE MURKIER GROUNDS OF BLACKMAIL" BY WARNING SINGAPORE THAT ITS ACCESS TO FOREIGN MARKETS, INVESTMENTS, AND TECHNOLOGY COULD BE LIMITED IF IT CONTINUED SUCH ACTIVITIES. RAJA LIMITED HIS COMMENTS ON THE FEER, SAYING ONLY THAT DAVIES HAD A FLAIR FOR CHOOSING LOCAL MALCONTENTS AS CORRESPONDENTS KNOWING THAT HE WOULD GET BIASED REPORTS FROM THEM. RAJA ALSO STATED CATEGORICALLY THAT GOS HAD CONFIDENTIAL

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NOT THE SLIGHTEST INTENTION OF GETTING RID OF THE FOREIGN PRESS. HOWEVER, HE CHIDED FOREIGN REPORTERS FOR NOT PARTICIPATING IN THE TELEVISED PRESS CONFERENCE CONFESSIONALS, ADDING THE GOS ARRESTED OR DEPORTED FOREIGN MEDIA REPS ONLY WHEN THEY STRAYED FROM THEIR ROLES AS OBSERVERS AND REPORTERS. HE MADE A POINT OF NOTING THAT THE GOS HAD NEVER ARRESTED OR DEPORTED FOREIGN PRESSMAN MERELY FOR CRITICAL OR ILL-INFORMED ARTICLES ABOUT SINGAPORE.

6. THE TIMING OF THE FERNANDEZ-ONG CONFESSIONS IS INTRIGUING, COMING AS IT DID IMMEDIATELY AFTER USG HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT RECEIVED LOCAL PRESS ATTENTION. EMBASSY HAD LEARNED FROM ISD THAT CONFESSIONS WERE READY FOR RELEASE SOME TWO WEEKS AGO. A JOURNALIST WHO PARTICIPATED IN INTERVIEW OF FERNANDEZ AND ONG HAS INFORMED US IN CONFIDENCE THAT THE INTERVIEW WAS ALSO TELEVISED A FORTNIGHT AGO. APPEARANCE OF CONFESSIONS AND INTERVIEW HARD ON RELEASE OF USG HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT ON SINGAPORE APPARENTLY WAS PURE COINCIDENCE; OUR JOURNALIST

SOURCE INSISTED THAT THERE WAS NO CONNECTION, THAT DELAY WAS OCCASIONED BY GOS DESIRE TO SPACE OUT THE CONFESSIONALS AND NOT TO HAVE SHOW ON TV WHEN IENG SARY WAS HERE, AS UNFAVORABLE REFERENCE IS MADE TO CAMBODIA.

7. COMMENT. RAJA'S ASSERTION THAT SINGAPORE INTERNATIONAL REPUTATION HAS NOT SUFFERED AS A RESULT OF RECENT EVENTS APPEARS TO US AS WELL AS TO THOUGHTFUL LOCAL OBSERVERS TO REPRESENT SOMEWHAT WISHFUL THINKING. GOS IS PERHAPS FORTUNATE THAT IT DOES NOT COME IN FOR MUCH ATTENTION IN U.S. PRESS. BUT, IT DOES RECEIVE ITS KNOCKS IN THE BRITISH PRESS, AS RAJA ACKNOWLEDGED. LESLIE FONG, NEWS EDITOR, STRAITS TIMES, ILLUSTRATED THIS IN THE MARCH 27 SUNDAY TIMES WHEN HE WROTE THAT THE (LONDON) TIMES IS "READ BY THE PEOPLE WHO RULE BRITAIN AND EUROPE. LIKEWISE, CONFIDENTIAL

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THE FINANCIAL TIMES...IS READ BY THOSE WHO OWN BRITAIN AND EUROPE." WITH A DEGREE OF TEMERITY NOT OFTEN EXHIBITED BY LOCAL COLUMNISTS, FONG ALSO WROTE THAT "I AM WORRIED ABOUT THE BAD PRESS SINGAPORE IS GETTING INTERNATIONALLY, DESPITE THE FOREIGN MINISTER'S ASSURANCE IN PARLIAMENT. OUR INTERNATIONAL REPUTATION MAY BE UNTARNISHED RIGHT NOW AND OUR POSITION NOT IN JEOPARDY, BUT WHAT IF THE CHISELLING AWAY AT OUR NAME CONTINUES WITH MOUNTING FEROCITY?"

8. FINALLY, IF THE GOS HAS NOT CONVINCED ITS FOREIGN CRITICS THAT ITS ACTIONS ARE WARRANTED BY THE REAL AND PRESENT DANGER POSED BY THE COMMUNISTS AND THEIR DUPES, HAS IT AT LEAST CONVINCED THE YOUNG, ENGLISH-EDUCATED ELITE OF SINGAPORE? THERE ARE DOUBTS ON THIS SCORE AS WELL. COMMENTATORS IN BOTH LOCAL ENGLISH LANGUAGE PAPERS HAVE REFLECTED THE COMBINATION OF DISBELIEF AND BOREDOM WHICH ARE ACCORDED SUCH CONFESSIONS BY THE VAST MAJORITY OF SINGAPOREANS. GOS IS AWARE OF THIS SHORTCOMING AND HAS BEEN EXPERIMENTING WITH THE FORMAT OF THE TELEVISED CONFESSION. UNTIL RECENTLY, TELEVISED CONFESSIONS FEATURED UNIDENTIFIED INTERVIEWERS WHO POSED LEADING QUESTIONS. WITH THE CASES OF LEONG MUN KWAI (SINGAPORE 777 AND 874) AND RAMAN/SENKUTTUVAN, HOWEVER, THE GOS MOVED TO THE TELEVISED PRESS CONFERENCE. THERE THE DETAINEES, ACCOMPANIED BY A GOS MODERATOR, FACED A LARGE NUMBER OF LOCAL AND FOREIGN JOURNALISTS. THIS FORMAT APPARENTLY HAS NOW ALSO BEEN DISCARDED, SINCE WITH ONE EXCEPTION ONLY LOCAL JOURNALISTS ASKED QUESTIONS, HELPING TO GIVE THE PROCEEDINGS A STAGED, UNNATURAL APPEARANCE. A NEW -- AND RELATIVELY PROMISING -- FORMAT WAS INTRODUCED FOR THE FERNANDEZ/ONG

CONFESSION. THREE LOCAL JOURNALISTS AND THE TWO
DETAINEES SAT IN A CIRCLE AND HAD A REASONABLY NATURAL
CONVERSATION. NEVERTHELESS, THE DETAINEES STILL DID
NOT COME ACROSS AS CREDIBLE OR CONVINCING. PERHAPS THE
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PROBLEM LIES NOT WITH THE CONFESSION FORMAT PER SE BUT
WITH THE SUBSTANCE OF THE CONFESSIONS THEMSELVES, WHICH
REFLECT AT BEST MINOR AND USUALLY INEPT EFFORTS AT
SUBVERSION OR BIASED STATMENTS AGAINST
THE GOVERNMENT WHICH LEND THEMSELVES TO
EXPLOITATION BY THE COMMUNISTS.

9. THE \$64 QUESTION, POSED BY THE FEER IS WHY A
MAN IN LEE KUAN YEW'S "POSITION RUNNING A TIGHT
LITTLE ISLAND, TO WHICH HE SEES NO REAL THREAT FOR
THE NEXT 10 YEARS, AND IN THE AFTERMATH OF A SWEEPING
ELECTION VICTORY, SHOULD BEHAVE SO DEFENSIVELY AND
WITH ALL THE SYMPTOMS OF A MASSIVE SENSE OF IN-
SECURITY?" THE ANSWER MAY LIE IN LEE'S CHARACTER AND
STYLE. SEEING HIMSELF AS RULER OF A TINY BUT DESIRABLE
ISLAND SURROUNDED BY POTENTIAL FOES AND BEING PARTICULARLY
SENSITIVE TO THE REAL OR IMAGINED MACHINATIONS OF HIS
ERSTWHILE COMMUNIST ALLIES WHOM HE OVERCAME ONLY A
DECADE AGO, LEE APPARENTLY FEELS HE MUST ATTACK ANY IN-
CIPIENT SUBVERSION WITH ALL THE RESOURCES AT HIS DISPOSAL
BEFORE IT CAN TAKE HOLD. BUT, BY SO DOING, HE APPEARS
TO BOTH DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN OBSERVERS TO BE OVERREACTING
TO WHAT ARE, FOR THE MOST PART, MINOR AND/OR INEPT COMMUNISTS
OR THEIR DUPES. THERE OUGHT TO BE A MIDDLE GROUND,
AT LEAST IN THEORY; BUT THE REALITY ACCORDING TO LEE KUAN
YEW IS THAT ANY SUBVERSION MUST BE NIPPED IN THE
BUD AND MUST BE USED IN AN EXPOSITORY MANNER TO PUT
THE POLITICALLY UNAWARE OR GULLIBLE ON THEIR GUARD.
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